The Relationship Between the Dark Triad and Aggression in Income Tax Employees: Moral Disengagement as a Mediator

Zunaira Khan

University of the Punjab

Afshi Yahya Khan

Forman Christian College, A Chartered University

The present cross-sectional research was designed to investigate the relationship between the dark triad, moral disengagement, and aggression in income tax employees. It further explored the predictive role of dark triad for aggression. Finally, mediation of moral disengagement between dark triad and aggression was also investigated. A sample of 150 income tax employees, of ages between 25-40 years was included in the research because of the paucity of income tax employees in the population. Data were collected through demographic questionnaire, Dark Triad of Personality (SD3) (Paulhus et al., 2013), Moral Disengagement Measure (Moore et al., 2012) and the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). Significant relationship between the study variables was found in the results: the dark triad (narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy), moral disengagement and aggression. The dark triad came out as a significant predictor of moral disengagement and aggression while moral disengagement significantly predicted aggression. Moral disengagement was found to be a strong mediator between dark triad and aggression. The present research has significant implications in the areas of industrial and organizational psychology and can be used to detect and observe causal factors of moral disengagement and aggression.

Afshi Yahya Khan, Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College, A Chartered University.

Zunaira Khan, Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Afshi Yahya Khan, Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College University. Email: afshiyahya@gmail.com

Personality is a combination of distinct traits, each differing from one another depending on a certain basis. While previous literature has considerable focus on positive personality traits, dark traits have been comparatively less researched. Human personality may have a dark side which can negatively impact the entire life of an individual as well as their surrounding environment. In most of the previous research, it was found that the dark triad was more prominent in the clinical domain but now due to the development of standardized non-clinical tools, it can also be measured in a sample of normal population (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals that fall in the dark triad may possess moral disengagement which leads to the violation of ethical guidelines in various contexts, for e.g., organizational settings (Moore, 2008). Moral disengagement can further lead to certain intense traits i.e., aggression. Aggression is a negative behavior that can cause adverse effects on personality and may lead to socially aversive behaviors as well for e.g., hurting someone verbally or physically (Dodge et al., 2006). Thus, one of the objectives of this study is to establish whether moral disengagement has a mediating role between the dark triad and aggression.

The dark triad of personality encompasses the three conceptually interconnected but distinct socially-averse personality constructs which includes psychopathy, machiavellianism and narcissism. By early researchers, dark triad has been defined as a combination of dark aversive factors which are not considered positive towards the psychological development of a healthy individual. This trio of psychopathy, narcissism and machiavellianism represents itself on a continuum of functioning which shows that the dark triad is neither pathologized, nor pathological. In spite of being distinguishable, the three variables supposedly exhibit similar underlying features i.e., self-importance and authoritative personality as demonstrated in dark triad behaviour (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals scoring high on the dark triad have a greater tendency to be manipulative, less empathetic towards others, wallow in self-pity and self-love, and consider oneself irresistibly charming (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals high in the dark triad traits mostly bring out the worst in human behavior (Jonason & Luevano, 2013). All three traits of the dark triad are linked with putting onself first to have desirable outcomes, but they are different in certain aspects. Machiavellianism is linked to manipulation for personal gain (Paulhus & Williams, 2002); narcissism consists of self-admiration, psychopathy is associated with anti-social behaviour and extreme egocentrism.

Narcissism is unhealthy when it consists of lordliness, grandiosity and egocentricity. It is a long-term pattern of abnormal behaviour, which is positively related to psychopathic personality, which is pro-active in nature i.e., self-motivated towards the exhibition of aggression (Penney & Spector, 2002).

Psychopathy is an unhealthy and socially undesirable trait, which is associated to spontaneity, heartlessness, and socially hostile behaviour (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). In context of psychopathy, literature has more focused on the consideration of three important defining elements which include: A spontaneous behavioural pattern, a duplicitous interpersonal pattern, and lack of emotional experience of an event (Craig et al., 2013). Furthermore, a psychopathic personality is composed of impulsive thrill-seeking, selfishness, callousness, lack of personal influence and remorselessness (Craig et al., 2013). It also entails artificial charm which leads an individual to tackle various social situations by using various cognitive empathy strategies (Craig et al., 2013).

Machiavellianism is defined as one's ability to deceive and manipulate others for personal gains, in social affairs (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellianists are good mind readers i.e., they use cognitive empathy for this purpose and by empathizing the thoughts of the victims, they start manipulating anticipated as well as perceived events in their favour.

The dark triad also effects some aspects of psychological development of an individual; one such aspect is linked to morally disengaged behavior (Egan et al., 2015). Bandura (1999) defined moral disengagement as the process of acting negatively and harmfully to tackle various social situations because some individuals feel unchained from self-censure and potential blame (Bandura, 1999). Ribeaud and Eisner (2010) defined moral disengagement as the mechanism in which an individual (who is generally rule-abiding and has defined moral values), under the influence of various cognitive distortions, becomes irresponsible and immoral towards their moral values. These distortions are the leading element towards aggression in workplace, which ultimately reduces one's productivity. Moral disengagement serves to promote inhumanities through moral justification, euphemistic labellings, advantageous comparisons, displacement of responsibilities, diffusion of responsibilities, disregard of consequences, attribution of blame and dehumanization (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010). Moral disengagement is the practical application of callous behaviour towards fellow beings and also the misuse of authorities for self-benefits and personal gains. Those high in moral disengagement also seems to get involved in morally

disengaged activities and then to justify their activities, they use aggressive acts (Gabbiadini et al., 2014).

Buss (1961) simply defined aggression as any behavioural action which hurts others either physically or mentally. However, this definition of Buss (1961) lacks the subjective concept of intention for example, during a foggy night if someone hurts your car then it will not be considered as an intentional harm or aggression and the bullying behaviour in schools will be considered as an intentional harm to the self-image of another student. Different perspectives have defined aggression in different ways; Psychoanalysts defined aggression as inevitable and unlearned instinct. Aggressive behavior was said to be an essential part of human life to reduce tension and urge happiness. Behaviorists have claimed aggression to be a consequence of external factors and not as an unlearned instinct. Social psychologists concluded aggression as any behavior directed towards harming other human beings.

The literature regarding dark personalities has shown that to tackle various social situations, these individuals use force to harm others for personal benefits and are more prone towards unethical behaviour and immoral activities. However, a brief overview regarding experiences of income tax employees in income tax field reflects a very different picture. Willemse (2017) investigated the meditational role of moral disengagement between the different facets of dark triad. Sijtsema et al. (2019) also found that individuals having dark personalities are more inclined towards morally disengaged behaviors to gain their personal benefits, while deactivating their self-regulatory mechanisms. Similarly, Richmond and Wilson (2008) found that participants scoring high on moral disengagement also scored high on aggression to justify their immoral acts by force. Both studies link the dark triad and aggression to moral disengagement. Moreover, Paciello et al. (2008) reported that adolescents with high moral disengagement score were also high on aggression and were more likely to show frequent aggressive and violent acts in late adolescence. Furthermore, Pabian et al., (2015) found strong positive relationship between aggression and psychopathic traits among individuals who frequently use social media. In addition to this, narcissism emerged as the unique predictor of aggression in response to undesirable provocations.

Objectives

The objectives of present research included to explore in a sample of income tax employees:

1. The correlation between the dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression.
2. Dark triad as a predictor for moral disengagement and aggression.
3. Moral disengagement as mediator between the dark triad and aggression.

Hypotheses

1. The dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression are significantly correlated.
2. The dark triad predicts aggression.
3. The dark triad predicts moral disengagement.
4. Moral disengagement predicts aggression.
5. Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between the dark triad and aggression.

Method

The Cross-sectional research design was opted in the present study.

Sample

The study included 150 income tax employees (135 men and 15women) with age the range of 25-40 years ($M = 34.1$, $SD = 5.79$). Employees with grade 14-20 were selected through non-probability convenient sampling. All participants were employees at a regional branch of income tax house, Lahore, Pakistan. $N = 113$ (75%) of the participants had 14-16 job scale while $N = 37$ (24%) had 17-20 job scale. The employees were contacted through the organization management following ethical protocol.

Measures

Demographic Sheet

The demographic sheet contained questions about gender, age, religion, number of siblings, birth order, education, family system, employment status, monthly income, legal complications, drugs involvement and religious inclination of the participants.

Dark Triad of Personality (SD3)

SD3 was developed by Paulhus et al. (2013). This measure contains 27 items with three subscales: Machiavellianism subscale (item 1-9), Narcissism subscale (item 10-18) and Psychopathy subscale (item 19-27). Each subscale contains nine items. Five of the items are reverse coded (11, 15, 17, 20 and 25). It is a five-point Likert scale (1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*). Alpha reliability of the questionnaire ranges from .68 to .74 and intercorrelations fall between .22 to .40 (Paulhus et al., 2013). This scale was administered in English, as created by the original author.

Moral Disengagement Measure (MD-M). This scale was developed by Moore et al. (2012). This scale has 8 items, each measuring one mechanism of moral disengagement: moral justifications (MJ), euphemistic labellings (EL), advantageous comparisons (AC), displacement of responsibilities (DIS), diffusion of responsibilities (DIF), distorting consequences (DC), attribution of blames (AB) and dehumanization behavior (DH). Items are measured on 7-point Likert scale (1 being *strongly disagree* and 7 being *strongly agree*). The scale is found to be reliable and alpha coefficient value of the scale is .80 (Moore et al., 2012).

The Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BP-AQ). A 29 item questionnaire that measures physical and verbal aggression, anger and hostility on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being *extremely uncharacteristic* and 5 being *extremely characteristic*). Two items of this scale are reverse coded (9 and 16). Items 1 to 9 measure physical aggression. Items 10 to 14 measure verbal aggression. Items 15 to 21 measure anger. Item 22-29 measure hostility. The scale is found to be valid and the alpha coefficient of the scale is above .60 (Buss & Perry, 1992). The reliability of the scale ranges from .72 to .85 for various subscales, with a total score reliability of .89. Further, test-retest reliability ranges from .72-.80 with a test- retest reliability of .80 for the total score (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Procedure

For data collection, a permission letter was taken from Head of the Department. On the appointed day, questionnaires were distributed among the participants. The respondents were made aware of the ethical considerations of research study and consent form was provided to be filled. The questionnaire consisted of the information sheet, consent form, demographic sheet, and the questions regarding the three variables. The respondents were given a brief description of the topic and the purpose of the study. The responses of the

respondents were noted. The complete data collection was done by the two months.

Ethical considerations

This study followed APA 7th (ed.) guidelines. Approval was granted by IRB. Scale permissions were sought from their authors. Purpose of study was explained to the participants before administering the questionnaire, and their informed consent was also obtained. All responses were secured in the researchers' password-protected computer.

Results

After the data collection, analysis of the data was done and reliability and Cronbach's alpha value were calculated. After this, the results were analyzed. A total of 160 questionnaires were given and 10 were not returned thus 10 were eliminated. The overall response rate was 93.7%.

The data was analyzed in following steps. Initially, reliability analysis for each assessment measure was carried out through Cronbach's alpha (Table 1). In the next step, descriptive statistics were calculated in the form of frequencies and percentages for the demographic variables. In the third step, Pearson product moment correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between the research variables (Table 2). In fourth and last step, mediation analyses through SEM (Structured Equation Model), using AMOS was done analyze the mediating role of moral disengagement between dark triad and aggression (Table 3).

Table 1

Reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics (N=150)

					Ranges	
Scales	*k*	*M*	*SD*	*α*	Potential	Actual
Dark triad	27			.83		
Machiavellianism	9	30.4	5.5	.64	9-45	15-40
Narcissism	9	26.8	5.6	.67	9-45	15-39
Psychopathy	9	25.8	6.6	.69	9-45	9-39
Moral disengagement	8	36.2	9.4	.72	8-56	21-56
Aggression	29	116.3	15.0	.86	29-145	92-147

Note. k = No. of items; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1 shows the Cronbach's alpha for the total scores of Dark triad scale as .83 while for subscales ranging from .64-.69 which is in acceptable range. While the Cronbach's alpha for Moral disengagement and aggression scale was found to be .72 and .86 respectively which is again in acceptable range.

Table 2

Correlation between Study Variables (N=150)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Machiavellianism	-	.44**	.45**	.12	.41**
2. Narcissism		-	.46**	.28**	.52**
3. Psychopathy			-	.54**	.34**
4. Moral disengagement				-	.42**
5. Aggression					-

Note. **$p < .01$.

Table 2 reveals that the relationship between Narcissism and Psychopathy is positive and significantly correlated to Moral Disengagement i.e., increase in Narcissism and Psychopathy leads to Moral Disengagement in income tax employees. Moreover, Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy are also positive and significantly correlated to Aggression i.e., employees high on Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy are also high on aggression. The results of the Moral Disengagement with aggression shows that Moral Disengagement is positive and significantly correlated to Aggression i.e., increase in Moral Disengagement leads to an increase in Aggression in income tax employees.

Structured equation model was used to explore the mediating role of moral disengagement, between dark triad and aggression. Model fits are presented in Table.

Table 3

*Fit Indices for* Dark triad, Moral disengagement and Aggression

Model	χ^2	df	$\chi2/df$	p	CFI	NFI	IFI	RMSEA
Initial model	49.35	3	16.4	.000	.78	.77	.79	.32
Model fit	4.23	3	1.4	.24	.99	.98	.99	.05
$\Delta\chi^2$	45.12							

Note. N = 150. Change in chi-square values are computed relative to $\chi^2 > .05$; CFI = comparative fit index; NFI = normed fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; RMSEA = root mean square errors of approximation and χ^2 = chi-square.

The results of fit indices for study variables, i.e. dark triad (machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy), moral disengagement and aggression are given in table. The absolute fit for model fit was $\chi^2 = 4.23$, $p = < .05$. The fit indices reflected good fit of the responses with the tested model. The model fit was examined in one main stage. In this stage, the indices for absolute and relative fit (CFI, NFI, IFI and RMSEA) were compared. Chi square test of absolute model fit was sensitive to the number of participants of research study and number of parameters. No descriptive fit statistics were analyzed o fit a model to the data. Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended χ^2 /df ranging from one to three while REMSEA value should be less than .05 (.07 is also acceptable). Comparative Fit Index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI) and normed fit index (NFI) value equal or higher than .9, are acceptable however $.9 \leq .8$ is also acceptable sometimes. Root Means Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) for initial model was .32. Whereas GFI, CFI, TLI values were .78 .77 and .79 respectively with a p value of .00. As the model was well fit as per the initially considered criteria, the indices of absolute and relative fit parameters (CFI, NFI, IFI and RMSEA) were compared. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) for initial model was .32, whereas the GFI, CFI, TLI values were .99, .98 and .99 respectively, while p was .24.These values are sufficiently precise to fit the model, that are also illustrated in the figure.

Figure 1

Empirical Results of Model Representing Standardized Regression Co-efficient.
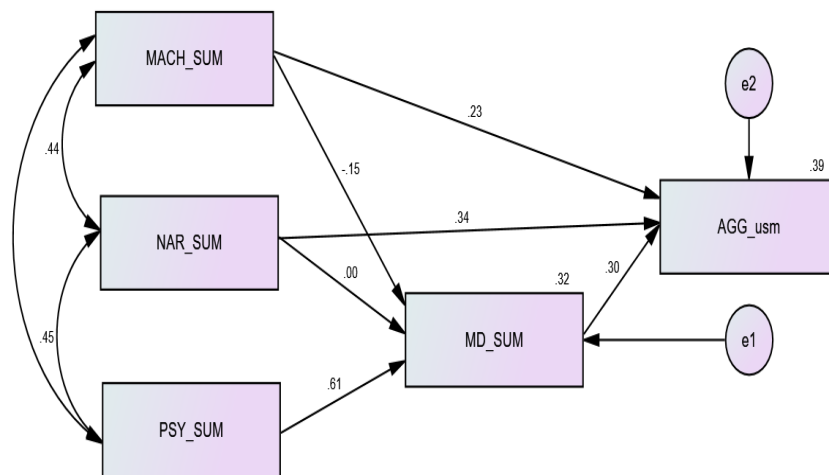
Note. MACH = Machiavellianism, NAR = narcissism, PSY = psychopathy, MD = moral disengagement and AGG = aggression.

Results showed that Machiavellianism and psychopathy positively predicted aggression. Machiavellianism negatively predicted moral disengagement. Results also showed that psychopathy positively predicted moral disengagement and moral disengagement also positively predicted aggression. Findings also depicts that machiavellianism has negative indirect effect on aggression. Whereas psychopathy have positive significant indirect effect on aggression.

Discussion

Personality comprises of both positive and negative traits, each differing from one another on certain basis. Dark triad (one of the negative traits of the personality) encompasses three associated but socially aversive constructs of narcissism, psychopathy and machiavellianism. According to the life history theory, individuals with dark personality traits are also high on disregard for social rules and morally disengaged behaviors (Jonason et al., 2010) like lying, deceiving, blaming others for their loss, misuse of authority and dehumanizing others while disabling their self-condemning phenomena. All these deviant behaviors lead to moral disengagement. Individuals with dark traits are more prone toward mechanisms of moral disengagement (Chi et al., 2016), which further leads aggressive tendencies in them, towards other individuals by misusing of power and rationalizing their aggressive behavior through technique of moral disengagement. According to moral disengagement theory of cognitive distortions, disabling the phenomena of self-condemnation results into externalized negative behavioral problems i.e. aggression. This aggressive behavior becomes the consequence of moral disengagement which was led through the dark triad (Chi et al., 2016).

The current study explored the relationship between dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression in income tax employees. The purpose was to investigate whether dark triad and moral disengagement predict aggression. The study further aimed to explore the mediating role of moral disengagement between dark triad and aggression. Correlation, prediction and mediation hypothesis were proposed and analyzed by results.

Firstly, it was hypothesized that there is a significant relationship between the dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression. Results of the study indicated that dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression are positively related to each other in the sample of income tax employees. These results are in consistence with previous literature, which suggests that dark personality traits in individuals

lead to mechanisms of moral disengagement and this often leads to aggressive behaviors such as physical violence, verbal violence, hostility and anger in them towards other (Egan et al., 2015).The reason behind this might be that dark triad can cause moral disengagement and aggression as well as depicted in the life history theory (Jonason & Luevano, 2013). Individuals high on dark triad have been reported to be high on morally disengaged behaviors such as gambling, neglecting social values, avoiding rules following and engaging in anti-social values, hostile attitude towards others and involvement in physical, verbal violence which can be an indication of higher aggression in these individuals (Paciello et al., 2008). These findings of current research are in line with the findings discussed above as a significant correlation was observed between Dark triad, moral disengagement and aggression in the study sample.

Secondly, it was hypothesized that dark triad would predict aggression in income tax employees. Results of the study showed dark triad as a strong predictor of aggression in income tax employees. The results are consistent with the previous literature (Spierings, 2014) which suggests that individuals high on dark triad (psychopathy, narcissism and machiavellianism) are more prone towards aggression. It might be due to that the people who are high on narcissism have an innate tendency to always expect attention and support from other people. If they do not receive expected response and agreement, they start getting engaged in aggressive behaviors towards others opposing them (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). On the other hand, individuals who score higher on psychopathy trait have more chances to show an elevation in their mood states such as they get angry quickly and return to their normal state of mood again (Baumeister et al., 1996). Psychopathy being the crust of high impulsivity and socially aversive behaviors have an increased tendency to be manifested in the personality of an individual who shows aggression towards other beings (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). Individuals high on machiavellianism are highly instrumental as they give more importance to power and self-love which when not received can cause aggression among them (Li-Ping Tang et al., 2008). Hence, it can be said that dark triad can lead to aggression among the individuals high on this triad according to certain social situations depending upon the type of trait among the triad being manifested on other people by them (Spierings, 2014).

In the third hypothesis, it was hypothesized that dark triad would predict moral disengagement in income tax employees. The results indicated that moral disengagement is predicted by dark triad in income tax employees. The results are in consistence with the

previous findings which suggest that dark triad can cause moral disengagement as well as unethical behaviors in people (Egan et al., 2015). Reason behind this might be that individuals high on dark triad have a tendency to be engaged in morally deviant behaviors and activities such as moral disengagement. They think only about their personal gains and are not even concerned about other people or their victims and are only motivated to achieve their personal goals. They are also highly instrumental such that they give more importance to money, power and self-love. They also have a tendency of avoiding fear in any situation of immorality which further leads to the mechanism of moral disengagement in them (Li-Ping Tang et al., 2008). Hence, it can be said that dark triad can lead to moral disengagement. Being manipulative and less empathetic, having high self-pity and considering oneself irresistibly charming and highly motivated to achieve personal goals while neglecting moral values set and defined by society, individuals have high tendency towards morally disengaged behaviors or simply moral disengagement (Jonason & Luevano, 2013).

In the fourth hypothesis, it was hypothesized that moral disengagement may predict aggression in income tax employees. The results of the study showed that moral disengagement predicts aggression in income tax employees. The results are in consistence with the previous findings which suggests that being engaged in morally disengaged behaviors can also heightened the individual's tendency to show aggression towards other people (Li et al., 2014). It might be due to that after disabling the self-condemning phenomena individuals show more aggression. Their inclination to show aggression towards other beings increases as they get involved in deviant behaviors such as rationalization of harmful acts towards others which can further increase their aggression if not being controlled. Moreover, in order to attain goals, a morally disengaged person shows aggression towards other which does not affect him/her, as zero value is given to morality just to achieve the desired standards and demands of desired purposes. Thus, due to moral disengagement and not being able to monitor inhumane behaviors towards others can increase aggressive tendencies .Hence, it can be said that moral disengagement can cause aggression in an individual, if they do not monitor their activities and continue engaging in anti-social deeds (Malamuth & Addison, 2001).

Finally, it was hypothesized that moral disengagement plays a mediating role between the relationship of dark triad and aggression. Results indicated that aggression is caused due to dark personality traits which are further facilitated by moral disengagement.

Individuals with dark personality traits manifest the fast life strategy characterized by lying, deception and aggression (Jonason et al., 2010; Pabian et al., 2015). These fast life strategies can often cause them to disregard rules as well by engaging in deviant activities that are harmful not only for the society but for the deviant person as well. Such an example of consequences includes aggression which can hinder the rational thinking capabilities of the individual showing aggression and moral disengagement. The dark personality trait such as Machiavellianism can also cause a person to show immoral behaviour for personal gains thus using aggression cause no harm to their personalities for personal satisfaction and gains (Li-Ping Tang et al., 2014).

Limitations and Suggestions

The study included a small sample of income tax employees due to their scant availability which limited the generalizability power of the results. Further research should explore the relationship of study variables in different organizational settings as well. Results of the current study have been generated from self-reports of the employees, tainted by the social-desirability bias and were not supplemented with other measures, like partners' reports, families' reports, peers' reports or any other observations.

Conclusion

The present research explored the relationship between Dark triad personality traits, moral disengagement and aggression among income tax employees. It also aimed to explore the role of Dark triad and moral disengagement in predicting aggression along with mediating role of moral disengagement in Dark triad and aggression. The results revealed that a strong correlation is present between all three variables. Further, the results also endorsed the predictive role of Dark triad and moral disengagement in aggression. In addition to that results reflected that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between Dark triad personality traits and aggression as revealed by model fit indices.

Implications

The research aimed at providing a helping model that could be utilized in various educational, research, organizational and clinical settings. Also, in forensic therapies and criminal counseling, and those

social settings, which consists of individuals with varying personalities. Knowledge of the main components can also be understood which leads towards aggressive and morally disengaged personalities. Moreover, this study could also be used to understand the ways in which moral disengagement is associated with the dark triad.

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